At the 1992 Republican National Convention, the conservative politician Pat Buchanan declared, “There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as was the Cold War itself; for this war is for the soul of America.” By invoking “the soul of America” and then pitting the political Right against liberalism—that is, “homosexual rights,” “radical feminists,” secularists—Buchanan’s rhetoric effectively mobilized fears that the Other would usurp “a nation we still call God’s country.” A year later, in 1993, Octavia E. Butler published *Parable of the Sower*, a dystopian novel exploring what happens when we as Americans are locked in a divisive “cultural war” that unjustly affects the disenfranchised. In *Parable of the Talents*, the sequel to *Parable of the Sower*, a fascistic president, allied with white fundamentalist Christianity, rises to power with the slogan “Make America Great Again.” While the correspondences with President Donald Trump’s presidency seem uncanny, even prophetic, Michael Brandon McCormack, in his essay in this collection, reminds us that Butler thought of these novels as “cautionary tales.” As such, they are “warnings of what might come to pass ‘if this continues’—if we should fail to make radical sociopolitical interventions and fundamentally reimagine what it means to be human in the here and now” (see Chapter 15). Whether prophecy or caution, now is a time when we clearly need to take inspiration from Butler’s narrative wisdom—from her prescient thoughts on the synergy between politics and religion in the United States, from the craft of her imagination, from her practical and spiritual insight about how we can shape the present and future.
This volume, *God Is Change: Religious Practices and Ideologies in the Works of Octavia Butler*, turns to Butler’s work as a crucial resource in times of moral, political, and social crisis. Butler envisions spiritual community beyond the bifurcated, polarizing world we live in. The chapters herein explore Butler’s religious imagination and place her fiction in new and provocative interpretive contexts to demonstrate and share the intellectual, spiritual vitality of her work. The collection proposes that Butler provides a lens of philosophical understanding and a blended epistemology of religion, healing, and liberation to reimagine and reshape the world: “At its best,” Butler wrote, “science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what ‘everyone’ is saying, doing, thinking” (“Positive Obsession” 135). For readers who have felt railroaded and circumscribed by hegemonic cultural norms, Butler envisions alternative ways of knowing and believing, paths of fruitful contemplation “off the beaten track.” However, just as the array of interpretive responses in this collection demonstrates, her fiction by no means prescribes those divergent routes; rather, it resists labeling and doctrine, undermines an ontology of complacency, and puts dialectical investigation into motion.

The concept of revolutionary change took shape in Butler’s meditations, work, and writing, beginning with the publication of her first novel, *Patternmaster*. However, in the Parable series, Butler developed Earthseed, a religion created and promulgated by Lauren Olamina, the charismatic leader of a successful movement. Earthseed inspires much of the scholarship included in this volume, which gives new readings and interpretations of this religion in light of the biographical, political, and cross-cultural contexts of the essays. Earthseed, as a faith that will create and sustain a new way of life in the apocalyptic world that Butler’s characters find themselves inhabiting, is predicated on the belief that God is change: “All that you touch / You change. / All that you Change / Changes you. / . . . / God is Change” (*Parable of the Sower* 3). Followers need to learn how to adapt and accept that change is the only constant in their world. The God of Earthseed is “inexorable, / Indifferent” to the fate of humanity, so disciples of Earthseed need to prepare and plan for disaster and change (*Parable of the Sower* 25). They can, however, transform the impact of change by adapting to it as they strive to reach the Destiny of Earthseed, which is to “take root among the stars” (*Parable of the Sower* 77). This threefold agenda comes together to form a way of life that allows adherents not only to survive but to thrive as well. In an interview Butler states:

I had in mind how certain historical populations have used religion to focus a group toward long-term goals—such as building cathedrals or
In other words, although Butler strikes back against the cultural war Buchanan declared, her work demands that readers inhabit a truly intersectional space, reflecting her own subjectivity as a Black American woman and centering the potential for religion as a creative force rather than dogma. Butler’s personal ambivalence around religion in fact provided productive impetus for her writing. From an early age Butler was inculcated into the Baptist faith; her grandfather was a practicing minister (like Lauren Olamina’s father in *The Parable of the Sower*), and her mother believed that the church would provide her with a strong moral and ethical foundation. Yet, almost immediately, Butler began to question and critique the church and its teachings. As an adult, she became agnostic. While she turns away from religion as the cornerstone of her life, it does become a touchstone in her fictions. As McCormack notes, for Butler, religion becomes a “significant resource for reflecting upon the shifting terrain of social justice work in the future, and the role of religious institutions, beliefs, and practices in such struggle” (8).

Since Butler’s death in 2006, critical work on her corpus has proliferated. Scholars have especially focused on the utopian and dystopian dimensions of her work, assessing the liberatory potential of her generic innovations along dimensions of race, gender, politics, science, and culture. As Chuck Robinson has noted, adding his own deconstructive turn to Butler’s conception of “minority,” “Compelling readings of Butler exist from the perspectives of critical race theory, Afrofuturism, black feminism, queer theory, and most recently disability studies” (483). Butler’s fictional worlds have also inspired claims about the transgressive power of erotics depicted therein, as, for example, in Nolan Belk’s reading of the Xenogenesis trilogy. On another front, research on the Octavia E. Butler archive, made available at the Huntington Library near Pasadena, California in 2013, has brought Butler scholarship beyond the bounds of discrete, published works to inspire new perspectives on her writerly fascinations, most notably in the book-length, biocritical study by Gerry Canavan titled *Octavia E. Butler*. Scholars have drawn from the trove of archival materials to consider how drafts of the novel *Fledgling* elaborate on the themes of symbiosis and genetics (Sanchez-Taylor). Butler’s research on nonhuman organisms showcases her contribution as a Black feminist philosopher of science and develops a queer take on biology (Bhang, Van Engen). Most significantly, Butler’s work as a writer, editor, and mentor built “a home place” for Black writers (Alexander).
The overview above represents the proverbial tip of the iceberg, both in breadth and volume. And yet relatively few articles grapple directly with the subject of religion in Butler’s oeuvre. Much of this smaller subset of scholarship weighs in on the emancipatory potential of Earthseed, putting Butler’s fictional religion in dialogue with Black theological traditions, particularly Black Liberation theology and a Black feminist biblical perspective. For example, Clarence Tweedy points out that Earthseed shares with Black theology a mission to counter the forces of racial and economic oppression, even while the Parable novels, as he observes, implicitly raise the specter of “messianic doctrine,” a form of demagoguery. McCormack celebrates Lauren Olamina as “an Afrofuturist (fifth wave) womanist theologian who only embraces notions of God that can be corroborated with her own experience and ultimately can be beneficial to her community” (19). Kimberly Ruffin interprets Earthseed as a persuasive syncretism of religion and science, premised on an “Afrofuturist black feminist biblical hermeneutics that strives to resolve conflict between scientific knowledge and religiosity” (91). In Butler’s fiction, this salutary syncretism does the work of dismantling “the religious-secular binary” (Hammer), and in ways that reconcile spirituality with scientific knowledge (Teish). Donna Spalding Andréolle argues that, in fact, Earthseed, while it challenges Judeo-Christian values that license oppression, rests on premises of Christian fundamentalism, more specifically the “original Puritan Project,” with its ideology of a manifest destiny. Meanwhile, Vincent Lloyd goes furthest when interrogating claims about Earthseed’s emancipatory power, asserting that Earthseed reinforces a neoliberal cultural logic that in fact undercuts the possibility of real change by promoting the atomized self as change agent.

The emphasis in religion-focused scholarship, then, is on how Butler challenges, resignifies, and/or replicates forms of existing religious and cultural ideologies. Sometimes these forms are gestured to in very broad terms, as when James H. Thrall, comparing Earthseed to other “invented” religions in fictional works, comments that Lauren Olamina’s Books of the Living (whose verses head each chapter in the Parable novels) “might be modeled on . . . marriages of scriptural principles with illustrative history, stories, or commentary in existing religious traditions” (513, 515). David Morris argues that Earthseed, which marries Lauren Olamina’s religious mission with her “commitment to religious truth[,] . . . assembles a workable utopian program” in ways that parallel Pauline Christianity (274). Also more specifically, Sarah Wood focuses on how Butler challenges patriarchal, white-authored Christianity by drawing on traditions of West African religion (through the character of Anyanwu, in the Patternist series) and by “problematizing the
The chapters in the present anthology build on this scholarship in two important ways. First, analysis included here heightens our appreciation for the range and depth of Butler’s thinking about spirituality and religion providing such critical contexts as an exploration of Hindu theology and mythos (Nanda), Soto Zen Buddhism (Kocela), Black female theology (Stanley), the theistic philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (Grover), Yoruban cultural and spiritual practice (Gibson, Brooks de Vita), biblical wisdom literature (Naylor Davis). Each chapter showcases how Butler’s fiction mobilizes the resources of narrative to invite meditation on what it means to be human and live with grace.

Secondly, the chapters herein bring home how Butler’s work offers resources for healing and community building: the community sustained and engendered by Earthseed dramatizes the power of ritual as a treatment for trauma (Osinski). Shelby L. Crosby’s chapter, “Creating New Worlds: Earthseed as a Tool of Black Liberation,” explores how Earthseed has been picked up and used by activists to advance liberation for people of color. Earthseed, as Brianna Thompson declares, “is a liberating religion that Lauren [Olamina] ministers through erotic pedagogy[,] . . . a loving, transformative force.” In the absence of community, the ability to shape-shift and effect metaphysical migration, powerfully rendered in Butler’s novel *Wild Seed*, brings “liberation and justice to black female bodily memory” (Whiteside). Butler’s novels broadcast the voices of Black women speaking in the voice of reason and prophecy, an impetus for social transformation (Burns). “By mixing SF [science fiction] with religious themes, Butler’s fiction encourages readers to question social values that mark marginalized bodies” (Hampton). Michael Brandon McCormack sums it up: “Octavia Butler offers a prophetic vision of the interplay between religion, violence, healing, and liberation that not only warns of potentially apocalyptic fates but also offers possibilities for more liberating futures.” And, as Chuck Robinson suggests, reading Butler is, in and of itself, a sustaining religious practice.

The first part of this volume, “Spiritualities and Religious Constructs,” explores the role of spirituality in Butler’s canon and how the construction or creation of an alternate “religion” leads to different models of world building, transcendence, and even concepts of trade. Contributors wrestle with Butler’s creation of a spiritual and religious ideology, questioning how religion is constructed, how believers function within their faith, and how the faith system of Earthseed works as both sacred text and wisdom utterances. Additionally, they recognize the philosophical heft of Butler’s literary meditations on this theme, and they show how her critique of established religion complements Biblical story of Genesis” (through the character of Lilith, in the Xenogenesis trilogy, 144).
her depiction of spiritual connection and practice. Moreover, chapters in this part interrogate the construction of a universal God that can be shaped and imagined by the characters and readers of Butler's fiction. Authors draw on other religious traditions, like Hinduism and Buddhism, to build a case for describing the construction of an alternate religious vision of a new world where God is change. By alternately addressing these themes, the selections complement each other concerning the concepts of community building and transcendence.

The first chapter of this part, Gregory Hampton’s “Religious Science Fiction: Butler’s Changing God,” argues that Butler’s creation of a religious philosophy in Earthseed creates a space that dismantles oppression, in particular, through her creation of Black female heroines who seek to end oppression through their relationship to change and acceptance of difference. Expanding the parameters of Butler’s thinking about religion, Aparajita Nanda, in her chapter “Transreligious World Building: Hindu Evocations in Octavia Butler’s Lilith’s Brood,” explores hybridity and identity through the Hindu principle of prana and how it is essential to Butler’s alternate religion of creativity for human survival. Christopher Kocela considers Butler’s religious ideology through the lens of Zen Buddhism, proposing that taken together Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents give us “a nondualistic understanding of the relationship between means and ends that emphasizes the need for collective action by celebrating diversity and challenging hierarchical and discriminatory thinking.” Charlotte Naylor Davis, in her chapter that focuses on the Books of the Living (Earthseed’s sacred text), argues how personal transformation and freedom are ways that can be best appreciated through analysis of their roots in biblical wisdom literature in Western culture. Mary Grover’s contribution draws on the thinking of the philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Seyla Benhabib to demonstrate that Butler’s sense of ethics, while standing in opposition to twentieth-century American Christianity, rests on certain faith-based beliefs in universal dignity. The part concludes with Chuck Robinson’s chapter, “Parable of the Talents as Genre Criticism and the Holy Spirit of Speculative Fiction,” which considers the sacred community that Butler creates in the novel, demanding that the reader become an active participant in her religious philosophical community.

In the second part, “Trauma and Healing,” contributors examine how Butler’s Earthseed and work ethics help its members to confront their trauma, learn how to heal, and move beyond it. Considering how Butler develops trauma and restorative spaces in the Parable series, Butler’s Wild Seed, and three of her short stories (“Crossover,” “The Book of Martha,” and “Speech Sounds”), these authors note that while Butler’s worlds are marked by “inevi-
table violence,” they are also grounded in the ideas of constant change and transformation (Outterson 434). Submissions in this part build on Sarah Outterson’s claim to provide different ways in which traumatic space can be transformed into healing space.

In “‘Only Actions’: Ritual and the Embodied Processing of Trauma in Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents,” Keegan Osinski opens Part II arguing that religious communities can provide safety and community for their followers through the process of ritual. Ritual, for Osinski, as modeled in the Parable series, is essential for followers to process and release trauma. In “Migration, Spirituality, and Restorative Spaces: Shape-Shifting to Heal in Octavia Butler’s Wild Seed,” Briana Whiteside contends that it is through migration and shape-shifting that Black women can combat oppression and heal from trauma. Like Whiteside, Ebony Gibson explores healing; however, for Gibson, healing is a function of the genetic trade that the Oankali offer in Lilith’s Brood, which she interprets in light of Yoruba culture. Building on the biblical allusions referenced in the names of Mary and Martha, Jennifer L. Hayes applies a Black feminist reading to Butler’s short stories “Crossover,” “The Book of Martha,” and “Speech Sounds.” Hayes examines the mental and emotional trauma these heroines go through as they weigh their contributions to the ongoing vitality of their society through which they often seek a sense of restoration and healing. Closing out the part, Tarshia L. Stanley in “Shapers of God: Octavia E. Butler’s Parable of the Sower and Womanist Theological Practice” explores the intersections of religion and politics and how Butler’s religious ideology builds community. Stanley proposes that while not traditionally read as a Black liberation theological text, Earthseed builds not only on of the work of Howard Thurman and James Cone but also on groundbreaking womanist Black theologians to shape a new space to reimagine community and strategies of community building.

In the third part, “Black Liberation and Notions of Freedom,” contributors explore various notions of freedom that Butler presents throughout her canon, particularly in her novels. Thinking through “the representations of the increasingly violent public discourse, policies, and practices of the far-right religious groups” in Butler’s work, particularly the Parable series, contributors seek to understand the fear and violence inspired by Butler’s God of change and how those oppressed by the violence can respond when oppressors take their liberties, when fear rules their lives.

Part III opens with Alexis Brooks de Vita’s “Octavia Butler’s Xenogenesis Trilogy, Bloodchild, and the Androgynous Third.” Brooks posits that the acceptance of and partnership with an ooloi, the androgynous third, makes freedom and peace possible. Brianna Thompson, however, provides a very
different interpretation of the ooloi, based on erotic pedagogy, which supports and nourishes its adherents through intimate connection. For Phyllis L. Burns in her chapter, “Black Women’s Prophecy: O. E. Butler’s Parables,” freedom only comes when Black women are free; thus Butler intervenes in the perpetual silencing of Black women, constructing a social space that is free only after Black women have been released from the societal restrictions that hamper them. Michael Brandon McCormack recognizes that, while fictitious, the Parable novels’ world mirrors our contemporary white nationalist discourse infected with the political/public theological rhetoric of “Make America Great Again.” He places Butler in the domain of American prophecy, reading her work as a trenchant take on the “affects and effects” of religio-political oppression. Closing out the volume, Shelby L. Crosby’s chapter, “Practicing the Future Together: Earthseed as a Tool for Black Liberation,” explores how political activists have adopted Butler’s religious ideology as a way to imagine a new world. Earthseed becomes a transformative political practice.

Whether through adapting to and becoming part of an alien race, surviving an apocalyptic United States, or attempting to build a race of superhumans that have extraordinary psychic abilities, Octavia Butler’s worlds are demanding, often cruel, and designed to expose cultural and individual biases. This collection focuses on and explores Butler’s religious imagination and its potential for healing and liberation. Contributors have focused primarily on the Parable and Xenogenesis series because these texts provide both the most directly theological forms (like the Parable novels’ verses) and because their narratives map so distinctly onto Butler’s larger project of exploring humanity’s ability to endure change and thrive.

Throughout her corpus, Butler explores, critiques, and creates religious ideology. She uses religion as a tool for transformation and change crucial to the worlds she creates. In doing so, she reveals her pessimism, joy, fear, and hope for humanity. Butler proposes her version of religion in her literary texts as offerings rather than arguments with foregone conclusions. She provides readers with a space beyond today’s polarization, a space of encounter, performance, and community. Readers can make what they will of this space. This collection continues the dialogue that Butler puts in motion when she offers ideas about religion rather than predetermined conclusions. This volume illuminates current religious and political conversations; moreover, it points to the importance of moving toward healing through religious and spiritual ideology rather than default reactionary political responses. God Is Change meditates on alternate religious possibilities that open different political and cultural futures. It is quite apparent, given the present political climate, that right-wing religious conservatives continue to wage Pat Buchanan’s “cultural
war.” It is this war that Butler is intervening in and why *God Is Change* is so very necessary.

NOTE

1. See, for example, Pfalzer, Thibodeau, Yoo, Zamalin, and, above all, essays in a dedicated issue of *Utopian Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2008.

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